“RELIGION,” OUR NEW ISSUE, IS OUT NOW. SUBSCRIBE TO OUR PRINT EDITION TODAY.

06.19.2024
Netherlands
Politics / War and Imperialism

To Become NATO Chief, Mark Rutte Denied Israeli War Crimes

BY
JOUKE HUIJZER

Long-standing Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte is set to be NATO’s next secretary general. To win the role, he had to prove his alignment with Washington — and he did so by repeatedly misleading the public about Israel’s crimes.

Mark Rutte talks with the media on June 17, 2024, in Brussels, Belgium. (Pier Marco Tacca / Getty Images)

Our new print issue, centered on the topic of religion, is out now. Follow this link to get a discounted yearlong subscription, plus unlimited web access.

The Church of Human Resources
TYLER AUSTIN HARPER

Democrats Aren’t Campaigning to Win the Working Class
JARED ABBOTT / FRED DEVEAUX

Cori Bush: Why I’m Calling for a Cease-Fire in Gaza
CORI BUSH

Shawn Fain: Workers Deserve More Time for Themselves
SHAWN FAIN

Every Thursday, a group of Dutch civil servants sacrifices its lunch break to gather in front of the Foreign Ministry to protest the Netherlands’ stance on Israel. Civil servants are meant to follow through on elected politicians’ instructions — and thus rarely openly criticize political leaders.

But this time, they don’t have much of a choice. As government officials, they have pledged an oath to the constitution — a document that clearly states that the Netherlands “promotes the international legal order.” Thus, many civil servants reason, it’s their duty to resist the government’s pro-Israel line.

Yet promoting the international legal order is not the Dutch government’s objective. In response to the Hamas-led attacks last October 7, Prime Minister Mark Rutte immediately declared “unconditional support” for Israel and “its right to defend itself.” Many critics pointed out that this basically gave *carte blanche* to Israel’s response. But Rutte was long unwilling to call for restraint.

More than that, the Netherlands actively contributes to Israel’s war. It manufactures several necessary parts to build F-35 fighter jets that are then shipped to Israel. It continued to do so even after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague stated that it was “plausible” that Israel is committing genocide. Even when a Dutch court blocked these exports, the government not only appealed the court’s ruling but also started to explore ways in which they could still export F-35 parts to Israel by other means, like first shipping them to the United States.

Overturning the Dutch Self-Image

Together with Germany and Great Britain, the Netherlands has been among Israel’s biggest supporters in Western Europe. Rutte has visited Israel twice to express support over the past year and has been in contact with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu more than once a month. He claimed that a ground attack on Rafah would be a “game changer,” but when Israel, after seven months of massacring Palestinians, actually commenced the ground attack, he stated that “no red line was crossed.” Although the Netherlands has historically been a persistent ally of Israel, it also considers itself to be among the strongest diplomatic defenders of human rights since World War II.

The Netherlands used to side with the Nordic countries by speaking out for international law, especially when its representatives visited countries with oppressive governments. Faced with events such as the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cup, ministers often spoke out against human rights violations in host nations, or even mounted boycotts. The Netherlands prides itself — as does Rutte personally — on seventeenth-century Dutch theorist Hugo Grotius, who laid the foundations for international law. Moreover, The Hague is home to the ICJ and the International Criminal Court. Hence the Dutch self-image has long been built on proper judgement and moral righteousness.

This image began to change in the 2000s, with several reports that the Netherlands bore co-responsibility for the genocide against the Bosnian Muslim population at Srebrenica in 1995. It deteriorated further when the Netherlands politically supported the US invasion of Iraq — later it also sent in eleven hundred troops — based on false information, while also ignoring internal reports by civil servants. (According to Richard Armitage, deputy secretary of state at that time, this also helped with the nomination of the last Dutch NATO secretary general in 2003.)

> “Although the Netherlands has historically been a persistent ally of Israel, it also considers itself to be among the strongest diplomatic defenders of human rights since World War II.”

Rutte, who was elected as an MP two months before the Iraq invasion, supported the 2003 invasion. He soon would become a junior minister and then leader of the free-market conservative party (VVD) in 2007. Three years later, in 2010, he became prime minister in the most right-wing Dutch government since 1945 that was supported by Wilders’s Freedom Party and hailed a milestone in further mainstreaming the far right.

Aligning with the US

In his early years as prime minister it was often argued that Rutte lacked vision. He was variously praised or criticized for his rhetorical skills as well as for laughing away serious societal problems — thereby variably being called “Teflon-Mark,” a “political Houdini” or “as slippery as an eel.” Before entering politics he was a boss at a peanut butter factory and his style of politics was more managerially pragmatic than morally principled.

To the ridicule of many, Rutte himself appropriated his reputation as a “man without vision” — infamously stating that “vision is an elephant that obstructs the view.” Yet despite his presumed lack of vision, Rutte stayed on as the longest-serving prime minister in Dutch history. But by the time of October 7 and the start of Israel’s wildly disproportionate response, he had already indicated that he would resign once a new cabinet could form.

But that was not all. By the end of October, Rutte openly expressed his interest in succeeding Jens Stoltenberg as NATO’s new secretary-general. Yet to win this NATO role, Rutte believed he needed to prove himself capable of steering it in the direction desired by its most powerful member. To convince the United States, he used his leverage to align the Dutch government’s position with the Biden administration’s as much as possible. For instance, Rutte only called for “an immediate cessation of violence” after the UN Security Council approved a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire on March 25, 2024 (with the United States abstaining).

Two months earlier, the Netherlands was the only EU member state that joined the United States and the UK in attacking the Houthi rebels that hijacked Israeli-linked vessels in the Red Sea. Meanwhile, the ICJ ruling in the South Africa vs. Israel genocide case in The Hague — which actually took place just a stone’s throw from Rutte’s office — did not gain as much attention as elsewhere and had little effect on the Dutch government’s line.

Deceiving the Public

The Rutte administration’s position did, however, result in several conflicts with officials from the Foreign Ministry — many of whom make a sincere effort to better the circumstances for Palestinian people and ensure international law prevails. Calls to avoid complicity in genocide were ignored by ministers — but triggered responses by several government parties, insisting that civil servants should resign rather than criticize policy.

> “Rutte’s government is well aware that the Israel Defense Forces ‘intends to deliberately cause massive destruction to infrastructure and civilian centers.’”

In November 2023, an internal memo from the Dutch embassy in Israel was leaked to the press, confirming that Rutte’s government is well aware that the Israel Defense Forces “intends to deliberately cause massive destruction to infrastructure and civilian centers.” According to the memo, this would explain the “high death count in Gaza” and “violates international treaties and laws of war.” It also stated that Netanyahu’s goal to eliminate Hamas is “a military objective that is virtually impossible to achieve.”

In December 2023, the UN General Assembly voted in favor of a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza. Civil servants advised the Netherlands to support the resolution along with the overwhelming majority of other countries including Western ones like France, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Nordic countries. Yet, just before the vote, Rutte and his direct subordinates intervened to overrule the Foreign Ministry. The Netherlands, like Germany, Britain, and Italy, abstained.

This was later revealed in a letter, anonymously sent by a group of senior officials from the Foreign Ministry, calling for a ban on arms exports to Israel. The civil servants expressed a general frustration with the fact that, all of a sudden, not their minister but Rutte determined the line on Israel. The letter paraphrased an internal request of Rutte’s subordinates to the Foreign Ministry asking: “What can we say to make it seem like Israel is not committing war crimes?”

A Boring Boris Johnson

This attempt to deceive the public fits a pattern of efforts to withhold information that increasingly determined Rutte’s domestic reputation in recent years. If Rutte, a self-declared Anglophile, could in his early years be described as a somewhat lighthearted version of David Cameron, he later turned into more of a boring Boris Johnson: giving parliament vague information and claiming to have no memory of anything. Yet in the Dutch case, the controversy wasn’t just about Rutte’s personal antics.

This reputation change began in 2017 when he leveraged all his political capital to push for the abolition of a tax on dividends for shareholders, hoping to persuade Unilever to (re)locate its headquarters from London to Rotterdam. Since this policy appeared in none of the party platforms, the opposition wondered where it came from — and whether the plan was pushed by lobbyists. At first Rutte denied that there had been any such memos. But thanks to an information-access request, it soon turned out that there had been several of them. Rutte weakly claimed he could not remember the memos — but managed to rally his coalition partners behind him.

A year later, doubts rose again when it was revealed that the cabinet had failed to inform parliament about seventy civilians that were killed by Dutch forces in Iraq during an attempted air strike on the so-called Islamic State back in 2015. Neither the Defense Ministry, nor the prime minister had informed parliament. Many opposition parties found it implausible that Rutte would not have been informed on so many deadly casualties, but he kept repeating that he had no memory of this. Since it was impossible to prove otherwise, he stayed on.

The “Rutte Doctrine”

Much more salient than the deadly air raid was the so-called childcare benefits scandal, in which thousands of families were falsely accused of fraud and had to pay sky-high fines, often pushing them deep into debt. In the official efforts to prove wrongdoing, they faced a very suspicious tax authority that was unwilling to disclose information on their decisions. When, after years of denial, it came out that the fraud allegations were false, victims were asked to submit endless paperwork to get compensation.

Rutte himself had made strict anti-fraud measures a political focus, and even chaired a committee that made policy recommendations. When the scandal came out, documents by those committees were released and Rutte was called in for a parliamentary hearing. MPs were surprised to find that so few documents existed, and it became clear that Rutte made deliberate efforts to minimize all traces of the decision-making process. The practice of writing down as little as possible of what is spoken behind closed doors was labeled the “Rutte Doctrine” by civil servants. The line was soon taken up by journalists and MPs, frustrated by his seeming evasiveness.

> “Many opposition parties found it implausible that Rutte would not have been informed on so many deadly casualties, but he kept repeating that he had no memory of this.”

Lack of Opposition

Although Rutte promised to increase transparency, there are few signs that he did. Soon it was revealed that, also after making this promise, he erased most of his text messages. He defended himself by claiming that there was no space on his phone — until last year he had relied on an old Nokia 301. Yet it also meant that crucial information on government decisions during the COVID-19 lockdowns will never be publicly available.

We could wonder why Rutte stayed on so long despite his convenient amnesia or outright lies. One explanation is that he always faced a chummy opposition and hardly upstanding coalition partners. His lies are not pathological but simply opportunistic; in this sense, his motives are not very different from other leaders who, lacking strong principled positions, can easily empathize with Rutte.

The same holds for the media. When, in March 2021, another lie came out that almost sealed Rutte’s fate, one of the leading political commentators of the public broadcaster tweeted: “The actual problem, of course, is not that he violates the truth. What politician doesn’t? . . . His problem is that he no longer managed to conceal it.” Mainstream Dutch political analysts are not interested in uncovering the truth, but in the theater of whether politicians get away with hiding it.

Implications for NATO

Many would argue that NATO should have been dissolved decades ago, along with the Warsaw Pact, in the spirit of ending the Cold War and improving relations with Russia in order to build a new international settlement. Still, this no longer seems a viable option in the short run. Today NATO is redefining its role and is thereby also one of the most important players in shaping a different world order. Whether there will be peace between Russia and Ukraine by and large depends on the stance and support of NATO toward Ukraine.

> “Rutte’s reputation as a deceitful politician won’t exactly do wonders for NATO’s reputation.”

It’s not expected that Rutte will deviate much from the political line of his predecessor Stoltenberg. But he has proven extremely obedient to the United States and willing to flexibly adjust when holding on to his position requires so. Equally worrisome is that over the past years, Rutte has especially courted the far right. He visited Giorgia Meloni during his last political campaign in March 2023 and earlier proved surprisingly friendly with Donald Trump — earning him an international reputation as a Trump-whisperer while he domestically pleaded “to regard Trump as an opportunity.”

His deference to the far right translated into policy, too. Rutte is considered one of the architects of the agreements between the EU and Turkey (in 2016) and that of the EU and Tunisia (in 2023) to transfer refugees there. The reliance on these states to limit refugee movements to Europe resulted in numerous human rights violations — something that EU members were well aware would happen when signing the agreements. In this regard, Rutte’s leadership is particularly concerning, given NATO’s increased presence in the Mediterranean to monitor refugee flows from Turkey to Greece.

More generally, Rutte’s NATO leadership is neither in the interest of its member countries, nor that of a safe international order. Rutte’s reputation as a deceitful politician won’t exactly do wonders for NATO’s own reputation. But more importantly, in building an international peace order we should be wary of a leader that nihilistically directs all his efforts to catering to the most powerful interests, just to safeguard his own position. Still, we may draw hope from the fact that his political longevity in the Netherlands owed to a lack of fierce or persistent opposition. This might change now that he is leading on the global stage; at the very least, such opposition is badly needed.

SHARE THIS ARTICLE
Facebook
Twitter
Email

CONTRIBUTORS

Jouke Huijzer is a PhD candidate in political science at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and an associate editor of *Jacobin Netherlands*.

FILED UNDER
Netherlands
Politics / War and Imperialism
Far Right / NATO / Iraq War / War Crimes / Israeli Occupation

FURTHER READING

Europe’s Mood of War Is Whitewashing the Far Right
FRANCESCA DE BENEDETTI

The Dutch Left Lacks a Project — and the Will to Fight
THIJS KLEINPASTE
JOUKE HUIJZER

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte Is Gone, but the Turn to the Right Continues
HELMER STOEL

The Dutch Government’s Benefits Scandal Is Rooted in Stigma Against Welfare Recipients
KEVYN LEVIE

SUBSCRIBE
DONATE

Our new print issue, centered on the topic of religion, is out now. Follow this link to get a discounted yearlong subscription, plus unlimited web access.

Catalyst
A journal of theory and strategy published by Jacobin

© 2024